



# THREE STEPS TO MANAGING CULTURE SHOCK

BY MARGARITA GOKUN SILVER

Culture shock can affect even the most veteran of expatriates, and potentially can derail what otherwise would be a successful assignment. Gokun Silver writes that there are three main steps to mastering culture shock, and outlines each step.

**A**t one time or another, a good number of us probably have experienced the phenomenon that is widely referred to as culture shock. People describe culture shock in different ways but most often it is defined as a rollercoaster of emotions we go through when we move and have to adjust to a culture or an environment that is different from our own.

The three steps mentioned in the headline were borne out of a presentation I was asked to make on addressing culture shock for an expatriate group in St. Petersburg, Russia. "What can I say about dealing with culture shock that hasn't already been said over and over?" I thought. "How can I present it in a different manner—so that not only these ideas stay with people but that they also are original?"



## The First Step—Perspective Power

Let us begin by examining the stages described in the sidebar below. Definitions may call them stages yet they are nothing but perspectives—points of view—that

we hold about something, in this instance a culture that is foreign to us. And, if that is the case, can we change these perspectives at will rather than wait around for the worst times to end?

### THE FIVE STAGES OF CULTURE SHOCK

**STAGE I**—also known as the “honeymoon stage.” During this stage, everything in the new place seems fascinating, interesting, and exciting.

**STAGE II**—during this stage, we begin to encounter daily struggles of living in the new environment and realize the great differences between the life we have known and the life we live now. This is the stage where most negative feelings surface because it is a time when we begin to set up our household, start grocery shopping for the first time, have a plumbing problem, and the like. Daily struggles, difficulty communicating and, in general, differences between our home life and our new life is often what produces deep dissatisfaction, hostility, anger, sadness, and feelings of incompetence.

**STAGE III**—during this stage, we begin to feel better because things are looking up. We are learning ways to live our new life, we start gaining some understanding of this new place, we know how to ask for what we need, and problems no longer seem grandiose.

**STAGE IV**—during this stage, the new place starts feeling a little like home, we succeed in making local friends, we no longer fret a lot about bad things, and we enjoy the good things.

**STAGE V**—also known as the “re-entry stage,” the stage when we have to return back to our home country. Many things we encounter on our return might be new to us because we have been absent for a number of years. Our friends have moved on and we still miss the “old” friends and connections we have made in the country we left. This stage is typical for “perpetual” expatriates in particular.

Let us give it a try. First let us take these five stages and give them names—names that signify the “feeling” of each stage. This way we can see that they are merely examples of how we look at our relationship with another culture. We can say that our relationship with the new place is:

- fascinating (Stage I);
- frustrating/painful (Stage II);
- doable (Stage III);
- enjoyable (Stage IV); or
- a longing (Stage V).

These definitions are by no means perfect, but they illustrate at least five different points of view we can take on our relationship with another culture. We begin to see that “stages”—or perspectives—are really the expressions of a “being” condition, a state we are in. And, as we already know, while we cannot often change things around us, we can change the way we feel about those things. Changing our own emotional response to something is within our control.

Perspectives we hold color the lens through which we look at the world. And, as such, they either empower or disempower. If you find yourself locked within a disempowering perspective, why not recognize that and move yourself out of it into another perspective—the one that will give you more power? Disempowering perspectives do not serve us at all—in fact, they make victims out of us.

If we open our vision and discover that there are other states of “being”—other perspectives or ways to look at our relationship with another culture—we will have a power of choice. We can now choose which perspective suits us best at the moment, which will make us happier and more fulfilled. Because remember, living in another culture will remain essentially the same no matter





how we look at it, but our looking at the situation will have an enormous effect on us, our emotions, and our opportunities.

So the first step to managing culture shock—and your relationship with another culture—is to notice what state of being you are in. What perspective do you hold now? What other perspectives are out there that also ring true for you? Step out of your present perspective and step into another one—the one that is more inspiring and holds more creative power.

### The Second Step—Feeling Good Matters

The second step comes from the research on marriages conducted by Dr. John Gottman, author of “The Seven Principles of Making a Marriage Work.” What, you may ask, does research on marriages have to do with culture shock? Quite a bit apparently.

As I read Dr. Gottman’s book in my relationship coaching study, I realized that some of what he proposes could be integrated successfully into culture shock management strategies by viewing a relationship with another culture just as you would at any relationship with another human being.

Think about it. Whether you are in a relationship with your spouse, your child, your friends, or your colleagues, you always have the good times and the bad times. And, of course, you try your best to avoid the bad times. It is the same in your relationship with another culture. Increase positivity in the relationship by increasing the number of positive interactions with the new culture and decreasing the number of negative ones.

To start with, aim for the ratio of about 5-to-1; that is, try to find five

positive interactions for every negative one during any given period of time (weekly works best).

For instance, what makes your day in your new place of residence? Is it going to a museum, chatting with a friend, having a coffee, taking photos, going to a theater, or shopping for souvenirs to send home? Make sure you schedule five of those activities each week. You will be surprised how quickly the feelings of culture shock subside when you follow this exercise.

### The Third Step—Negativity Be Gone

This third step also comes from the research conducted by Gottman. When he watched couples argue, he discovered that those relationships that consistently exhibited the “Four Horsemen of Apocalypse” in their fights were the least likely to last. How does that apply to culture shock?

If you spend the next few fights not only battling but also closely observing yourself and your partner, you will discover that fights escalate out of control and offer the least possibility of ending peacefully if any of these elements are present: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. These are the Four Horsemen of Apocalypse and all four create a high degree of negativity in any given relationship. And that often proves to be lethal to the relationship in question.

Imagine yourself unhappy in the country you are in or imagine yourself having a bad day. As with any relationship, your first inclination might be to resort to these four horsemen.

You may engage in:

- criticism (“These people are just so rude!”);

- become defensive (“It’s not my fault they don’t understand me.”);

- act in contempt (think of all the eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, or hostile humor); or even

- stonewall (“Well, if that’s how they are going to be, I won’t deal with them at all.”).

This kind of response does not only do anything to improve your day, it actually does a great deal in damaging your relationship to the culture. Bitterness and disrespect grow like weeds and soon you find yourself resenting the very name of the country in which you live in and of the people that populate it.

This, of course, creates more unhappiness that, in turn, brings more of the same. Bad days pile one on top of another and soon you find yourself desperately waiting for that flight that will take you out of there. Is that the way to spend two to three years of your life?

Step three is based on taming the horsemen and, thereby, decreasing negativity in conflict. Instead of judging, blaming, criticizing, and stonewalling, next time try to use humor, a sense of affection, or a sense of acceptance regarding whatever it is that is bothering you.

Blaming, criticizing, and judging only will escalate your conflict with another culture—the development you do not want. If, on the other hand, you use humor, you will avoid spiraling out of control in your frustrations and anger.

These three steps work very well together and they also work well on their own. Try them next time you experience culture shock. ■

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